

Along the track

Stories to Tell

Not so long ago I was talking to a friend who told me that he had never read a novel. He is an avid reader, but not of novels. “They’re just made-up, make believe,” he said. That may be the case, but stories don’t just entertain, they help us understand others, what it is like to walk in their shoes. They help us understand our world, where we came from and why and how we got here. They can help us imagine the future and think about the future we would like. Stories can be full of life, of memories, sometimes sad, sometimes joyful, they can be full of adventure and drama. They can take us out of ourselves and give us hope and they can encourage us to give thanks for who we are and how we came to get here.

We all have stories to tell. We are people of story, in many ways. We tell stories and people tell stories about us. After we have gone, we live on in the stories others will tell about us. Stories are more than just entertainment, they have their influence on us, they provide wisdom about the journey of life. In some ways, we are ‘products’ of stories we have heard from others. We learn from them, we change our behaviour because of them, we sometimes begin to imitate the qualities of the people in those stories. Is it any wonder that Jesus was a master storyteller, that so much of his message lives on in the enduring stories we have all come to know? Even for those who do not know much about him, they usually know something about his stories.

Jesus used parables, illustrations, and stories to teach his message. His stories were and still are compelling. But like all good stories with staying power, they do more than entertain. They hold meaning. Through them he enlightened those who were open to their message, they challenged those who came to trick him, he captured people's imagination, his stories sometimes inspired his listeners, sometimes they even upset them.

About sixty years ago I worked in a very, very remote area of Papua. We often visited the little villages up in those mountains and when it got dark the people went into their homes with their family and they talked. And talked. I wondered what they were talking about. Not a lot happened around there today. They were telling stories, from the youngest to the oldest. All the stories were important. They not only entertained but they made each person feel valued and important. But they also passed on the stories and beliefs of that group. When the catechist came to the village, they told and retold Jesus’ stories and helped the people link these stories to their own.

What a gift we give each other when we tell a story, even more so when we tell our story. Before we ate dinner at the table every night, my father used to ask us: “What was the best thing that happened to you today?” And we all had to have something to tell. Sometimes these items were interesting, sometimes a bit different, sometimes funny but never a source of ridicule or put down. What happened in our lives was made important by them and how others accepted them. Enabling someone to tell their story, even from a very early age, is very important, even though it may appear to be trivial or of not much consequence.

It is an honour to hear another’s story. He or she is entrusting you with something very precious, a treasure, a pearl of great price! It reveals something of our human adventure, something of the people we have known and loved. Story helps us to share the truth we have discovered as honestly and as openly as we know how. In so many ways stories can be the glue that hold us together, they help us hand on our memories, our traditions, our beliefs, what we value. Families come to know their history, their traditions, what we value when we share the stories and memories we have.

Story is a gift. Where would we be without them? They help us make sense of our world and help us all to understand where our stories fall short or are too narrow, where they exclude rather than include, where they divide rather than unite.

Will someone tell you a story today? Or perhaps more importantly, will you listen to a story today? Really listen?

Regards
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